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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions

Doug Brown, Editor



In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Penguin Books, 1966).

Blaise Pascal (b. 1623) seemed, as a youth, destined to make his mark in mathematics or physics. He was born to privilege. Horizontal thinkers who envisioned new societies based on the leadership of critical reason were among his conversational partners. He looked into the inner workings of church and state through the critical eyes of his father, a legal officer often at odds with Richelieu. None of his friends or relatives would have anticipated he would leave thoughts behind—thoughts about human potential for good and for evil, about faith and reason, about distraction, about philosophy and Christian thought, about paradox and hiddenness—which would grip readers in future generations.

Indeed, by his account, it took an extraordinary experience to reposition his thoughts on subjects he regarded to be much more fundamental and difficult than the scientific subjects that had previously preoccupied him. His sisters, who had entered Port Royal convent outside Paris after their father's death, would have attributed his change to answered prayer. The event—a carriage accident on the streets of Paris—left the social elitist Pascal

hanging between life and death. A piece of parchment was found sewn into Pascal's clothing after his death which recounted the decisive experience in 1654:

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, god of Jacob,'
not philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ.

'My god and your God.' 'Thy God shall be my God.'

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

He can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels.

Greatness of the human soul.

'O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee.'

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have cut myself off from him.

'They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters.'

'My God wilt thou forsake me?'

Let me not be cut off from him for ever!

'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.'

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ.

Pascal had restored to him the joy of salvation. In his day, he made a literary mark with his **Provincial Letters**. Written under pseudonym, Pascal defended the few Port Royal loyalists who, against relentless ecclesiastical and political opposition, remained focused on a more Augustinian understanding of human nature and divine intent. However, his primary task was to find the wording needed to get the attention of his still cabaret-distracted friends. He died (1662) before finishing this task. His vivid analysis of human nature and human reason—he postulated that Cleopatra's nose had altered the course of civilization—was widely rejected by his and subsequent generations as retaining too much of the despair about being human in traditional theology and too little of the optimism

characteristic of "enlightenment."

In ways, Pascal's defense of believing in a day of skepticism appears to have differed from Locke's later **The Reasonableness of Christianity** more in feeling and intellectual restraint than in lines of argument. But his thought only began to exercise their force when, by the mid-nineteenth century, his foresight about reason was finally admitted—that critical reason's most important contribution is the realization of reason's limits.

Instead of trying to justify my recommendation of **Pensees** by selecting a few of his thoughts, I will simply say that no work in the history of Christian thought subsequent to apostolic times has had greater impact on my perception of what being human entails. A diet of Pascal's paradoxical conclusions seems most timely for Churches of Christ, when any confidence in human wisdom and initiative is viewed with increased suspicion and when the judgment that what we have "restored" has little to do with the essence of biblical faith is being seriously considered.